



THE ARCHBISHOP  
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*The Archbishop writes in today's Yorkshire Post, looking ahead at the year to come. The article follows in full...*

What do the Yorkshire Dales, the Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Kozushima Island in Japan and the NamibRand Nature Reserve in Namibia have in common?

Answer: they have all received designation as a dark skies reserve. It means they are good places to go stargazing. They are dark at night.

Nowadays, unless you are fortunate enough to actually live in the Dales, most of us rarely experience complete darkness. It isn't just cloudy skies that conceal the stars, it is the ever present light pollution that we create. And it makes seeing stars much more difficult.

2000 years ago some stargazers and dreamers from the east looked into the night sky and saw a new star rising. They believed that it heralded the coming of a new king, so they dropped everything and followed the star.

It settled over a cowshed at the back of a pub in Bethlehem. But at this point in their journey they stopped trusting the star. They believed they were being led to a king. So consulting their own wisdom instead, they went to the Royal Palace of King Herod.

Well, you probably know the rest of the story. Herod was deeply threatened by what the wise men told him. He encouraged them to follow the star, find the new born king, and then report back. However, he wasn't planning to pay homage. Rather, he wanted this rival eliminated. Such is the way that power corrupts us. The wise men, on the other hand, having put their maps back in their cases, follow the star and are among the first visitors to the new born Christ. And being told in a dream of Herod's wicked intent, they return home by a different route.

What does this story say to us today? Is it just a lovely part of the Christmas story, or is there something else? Might it prompt us to question our reliance on conventional wisdom? Might it encourage us to find new ways home?

Conventional wisdom says that we need to get the economy started as soon as possible; we need to get out onto the High Street and spend.

But one of the reasons Covid19 developed and spread so quickly is because of our economic models, our endless travel around the globe, our insatiable appetite for what we want when we want it and all the environmental degradation that goes with this. And our environmental crisis is going to need rather more than a vaccination to be solved.

We need a different, greener, fairer economy. We need a bigger investment in sustainable jobs for a sustainable world. Here in the north, we could be in the vanguard of this, if given the support we need.

Conventional wisdom longs for things to get back to normal.

But COVID-19 has disproportionately hit our poorest communities. Inequalities of opportunity and access to basic things like food and shelter have highlighted unhealthy imbalances in our society. A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlights the levels of poverty and destitution in the UK. The eight most destitute places are all in the north of England.

We need a new route back to normal. We need a levelling up of opportunity, particularly for some of the poorest communities here in the north. Just as everyone needs healthcare, so everyone needs a home and a job and a meal. Not to have these things should not be thought of as 'normal'.

Conventional wisdom says that London is the capital of England and its centre.

But in the post Brexit world we are entering into, and if we want to preserve and strengthen our United Kingdom, we need to strengthen our regions, especially here in Yorkshire and the north.

We need a new route to a different sort of government where there is greater subsidiarity and more developed regional government.

Conventional wisdom says that we should look after number one.

But most of the problems of the world won't be solved anywhere unless they are solved everywhere.

This is certainly true of COVID-19. Everyone needs to be vaccinated! But it is also true of many other things as well. My well-being is tied up with the well-being of my neighbour. If I want to flourish, and if I want my family and my community and my nation to flourish, then I must pay attention to the health, well-being and flourishing of everyone else and across the globe. That is why our government's recent cut in the aid budget is not just bad news for the poorest countries in the world, it's bad news for us as well.

I am told that when Cabinet meetings got particularly heated, and when the meeting was stretching into the night, Abraham Lincoln would lead his colleagues outside and get them to look up into the night sky. Seeing that vast myriad of stars enabled them to put themselves in perspective.

We are all part of this glorious, amazing inter-connected universe. But we might also be the only ones who can actually gaze at the stars and be filled with wonder, such is the miracle of human consciousness. It gives us a particular responsibility. To each other. And to the world. Maybe if we also looked, this Christmas, at the bright light who is Jesus Christ, then we would get further guidance on how to live differently. In Jesus we see what humanity should be like.

I do wish the readers of the Yorkshire Post a very happy Christmas. Could I also encourage you to do some stargazing: allow yourselves to dream; and begin to discern the new routes we need to take in a New Year and what will be a new post-Brexit, post-Covid era.

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